United Nations E/CN.6/2017/15

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: Limited
21 March 2017

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Sixty-first session
13-24 March 2017
Agenda item 3 (a) (i)
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work

Ministerial round table: informal and non-standard work: what policies can effectively support women's economic empowerment?

Chair's summary

1. On 13 March 2017, the Commission on the Status of Women held a ministerial round table on the topic "Informal and non-standard work: what policies can effectively support women's economic empowerment?", under the priority theme "Women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work". The participants in the round table exchanged experiences, lessons learned and good practices in relation to the topic with an emphasis on policies and programmes to ensure the economic viability of informal and non-standard work and to extend social protection and labour rights to women working in the informal economy.

2. The Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan, Motome Takisawa, served as Chair of the round table, and made an introductory statement. Ministers and high-level officials from 19 Member States participated in the round table. The dialogue concluded with closing remarks from the Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), Lakshmi Puri, and the Chair.

17-04587 (E) 240317

Please recycle

Challenges posed by informal and non-standard work

3. Participants noted that women informal and non-standard workers are major contributors to national economies. However, they also recognized that women who are engaged in informal and non-standard employment are subject to a lack of social protection and labour rights, and face the occupational segregation, gender wage gaps, unequal access to resources and disproportionate shares of unpaid care and domestic work that apply to all women workers.

4. Participants highlighted a number of challenges confronting women engaged in informal and non-standard work. The non-contractual nature of most paid domestic work in the informal economy was identified as particularly problematic, denying domestic workers the social and labour protections afforded to formal workers. Several participants identified violence and harassment in unregulated workplaces as an overriding concern for women in the informal economy. Participants noted that rural women are particularly marginalized as workers in the informal economy. The situation of migrant women workers, who tend to be concentrated in low-paid and precarious informal work, was identified as a significant challenge, as poor working conditions in the informal economy are exacerbated by labour discrimination, sexism, racism and xenophobia. Many participants discussed the overwhelming burden of unpaid domestic and care work on women informal workers, which limits their chances for economic independence and empowerment.

Policy responses to support the economic empowerment of women engaged in informal and non-standard work

5. Participants provided examples of a range of multifaceted approaches that governments are taking to address the challenges resulting from increasing informal and non-standard forms of work and to create favourable environments for all women workers. Participants reinforced the need to increase efforts to promote the transition to formal employment, in that formalization provides women workers with social protection and labour right guarantees. Ministers also mentioned efforts to strengthen the legal and policy environment as a way to ensure legal protections for women in the informal economy. Several participants noted the recent ratification of the International Labour Organization Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189), as an impetus for passing measures to ensure decent working conditions, maximum working hours and minimum wages, and benefits such as vacation leave, sick leave and health care for domestic workers.

6. Participants discussed the importance of government prioritization of social protection and care infrastructure for the promotion of women's economic empowerment in the context of informal and non-standard work. Maternity and parental leave, basic income security for children and public works programmes were noted as policy responses that have been applied in different countries. Speakers pointed to the specific importance of paid paternity leave, supported by workplace policies that reward male workers who are actively involved in childcare. Ministers noted the importance of accessible and quality childcare and care facilities for children and other dependents to reduce women's disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work. Many speakers recognized the importance of investing in care infrastructure, such as early childhood education and health care,

to address the "motherhood pay penalty". Good practice examples were also provided of national care systems, government funding for preschool, childcare subsidies, funding for workplace crèches and tax allowances for employers who employ women with young children.

7. Participants emphasized the need for measures to make informal and non-standard work more economically viable by tackling gender gaps and advancing women's economic empowerment. Participants discussed establishing minimum wages as a key tool to reduce gender pay gaps and ensure an adequate standard of living for women informal workers. Several countries gave examples of recent labour market interventions to increase the economic viability of informal work, such as laws guaranteeing mandatory minimum wages.

8. Participants provided several examples of national education and technical and vocational skills training initiatives as a means of addressing the barriers women face in the transition into the formal economy. The programmes include those that aim to increase the participation of rural and indigenous women in the labour force and to encourage women to return to work after maternity leave. Many participants also discussed national social protection policies for women workers, both formal and informal, including policies designed to ensure workplace safety, address sexual harassment in the workplace, ensure minimum and maximum working hours per week and provide paid annual leave.

9. Participants identified entrepreneurship as a vehicle for women's economic empowerment in the informal economy, which can lead to improved incomes and contribute to poverty reduction at the household and community levels. They discussed measures to support women's access to finance and banking, and markets and supply chains. Particular emphasis was placed on enabling women in small and medium-sized enterprises to access credit and microcredit. Several participants gave examples of policies designed to increase access to finance for women entrepreneurs and small and medium-sized business operators, including enabling government regulations, subsidies and tax incentives, as well as targeted assistance through development funding, credit cooperatives and community banks. Some participants noted the renewed focus on ensuring credit facilities for women in special circumstances, including women who have been subject to violence and trafficking and returning migrant workers.